



Disoriented Time and Social Knowledge. The Historical Essay in Brazil, c. 1870–1940

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Abstract

This article analyzes the relationships between the writing of history and the experience of time in Brazil, c. 1870–1940. The focus of the analysis is the historical essay, arguing that this kind of essay was a privileged discursive modality for dealing with the problems of temporal order that featured that historical moment, characterized by a deep questioning about the paths taken by the Brazilian republic, by a distortion of the ideal of progress that defined, since the nineteenth century, the features of the modern concept of history, and, finally, by a desire to renew interpretations focused on the development of the nation.

Keywords Brazilian historiography · Writing of history · Order of time · Historical essay

A Disoriented Time

In 1924, the Brazilian literary critic Tristão de Athayde¹ complained that we were living in a society pressed by time, “in which all phases of civilization coexist, from the savage at the last degree of decay, to the Mediterranean and subtle intelligence, isolated or withered in the excessive and still primitive tropics.” And, he added, “from all of this emanates the feeling of the ephemeral and a continuous premonition of death” (De Athayde 1924, p. 239). The idea of *coevalness* of the “civilized” with the “savage” indicates a widespread perception of historical time that was common to many writers since the end of the nineteenth century. Moreover, it points to the perception of a crisis

¹Tristão de Athayde is the pseudonym of Alceu Amoroso Lima (1893–1983), literary critic and professor at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica of Rio de Janeiro (Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro).

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in the order of time, as Alberto Torres put it in 1914, stating that contemporary thought was passing through the most “anarchic crisis” that the human spirit has ever seen. For him, it was clear that, as in no other period, at that particular time, human progress was made by cycles, always going back to some previous point (Torres 1933, p. 24).

In this article I intend to analyze the relationships between the writing of history and this particular experience of time, from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the 20th. The focus of the analysis is the historical essay, arguing that this kind of writing was a privileged discursive modality for dealing with the problems of temporal order (or disorder) that featured that historical moment in Brazilian history.

The contemporaneity between different “stages” of History caused a sense of instability in which everything seemed to be ephemeral. The present was something elusive and instantaneous, a time that did not separate past from future, but appeared to be a disorderly juxtaposition of experiences sedimented in a chaotic and, to some extent, meaningless way. As a consequence, Paulo Prado² demanded to the reader of his essay *Retrato do Brasil / Portrait of Brazil* (1928) to stare for a moment at “the visible, palpable and living reality of this *Today* that appears, transforms and disappears at a glance, as the passing landscape in a car ride” (Prado 1931, p. 204). Above all, the situation seemed to indicate a kind of temporal disorder or a disoriented time that could compromise the historical development of Brazilian society and the ability of individuals to act politically.

That is why it became necessary for Athayde to ask where this disagreement in time came from, “this easy hopelessness of spirits, this moral ambiguity that still [did] not allow our soul to find its being?”. As a response, he suggested it came from “the constant divergence between the fatality of time, which slowly and discontinuously shapes our national reality, and the demands of our identity, so promising, so alive and at the same time so empty of relevance and breath; between what nature forces us to be and what intelligence asks us to be” (De Athayde 1924, p. 239). Deep down in his thought, Athayde manifested a generational perception that there was a mismatch between intellectual desires and the conditions of society; between what appeared to be a real possibility and the ever elevated images that the community formulated about itself – “our greatest ill”, as Silvio Romero³ wrote in 1908. Therefore, the diagnosis was elaborated considering the gap between “Society” (with its slow and discontinuous social development,) and “History” (with its accelerated time). For Athayde, his generation was before “a multiplicity of times of development” that made the time anarchic, in which “a very modern world overlaps, or rather inserts itself in here, to a very past world” (De Athayde 1924, p. 268).⁴

This sense of “displacement” was not exclusive to a few authors but has defined a persistent type of thought that created images about the nation since the first half of the nineteenth century. According to Octavio Ianni, “periodically, Brazilian society seeks to modernize itself, to become contemporary with its own time. It is as if we found out we were late and tried to speed up our past [and] overcome the gap” (Ianni 1993, p.

² Paulo Prado (1869–1943), member of a rich and important family of São Paulo, and one of the patrons of the modernist art in Brazil.

³ Silvio Romero (1851–1914), literary critic, historian, and teacher at the Colégio Pedro II (Pedro II School), one of the founders of the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Literary Academy), in 1897.

⁴ For a sociological perspective about the multiple “social systems of time”, published at the same context of the first half of the twentieth century, cf. Sorokin and Merton 1937.

430). The attempts to adjust the social times have created the conditions for discourses about absence, resulting in the *topos* of the “national delay”. This was one of the main perspectives of the so-called “generation of 1870”, which found in the monarchy, slavery, archaism of social structures and in the primitivism of intellectual elaborations, the main reason for that delay. Joaquim Nabuco’s⁵ words in 1866 were just one example of this kind of thought: “among us, reforms seem premature when they are already late” (Nabuco 1949, p. 174).

Maybe it was Euclides da Cunha,⁶ with his masterpiece *Os sertões. A Campanha de Canudos / Backlands. The Canudo’s campaign* (1902), who described the experience of time of his generation most intensely and keenly:

After living for four hundred years on a vast stretch of seaboard where we enjoyed the benefits of civilized life, we were suddenly given the unexpected inheritance of a republic. Swept up in the current of modern ideas, we left behind a third of our people, in the heart of our country, who lived in a centuries-old state of darkness. Dazzled by a civilization that came to us secondhand, blind copyists that we are, we rejected what was best in the organic codes of other nations. With revolutionary zeal, we dismissed the smallest compromise with the realities of our national situation. We succeeded only in deepening the divide between our way of life and that of our crude native sons, who were more strangers to us than the immigrants who came from Europe. It was not an ocean that separated us but three entire centuries (da Cunha 2004, p. 174–175).⁷

As a fervent republican, Euclides da Cunha revealed in his sharp words not only the disillusionment with the republic but also a perspective that saw a disagreement in the historical order – as if the archaic society was not able to keep up with the modern political system. By describing the conflict in the Brazilian backlands (opposing that region and its inhabitants to the whole society that lived next to the coast), Euclides managed to transform the spatial differences into temporal ones: for him, crossing the hinterlands was like crossing the calendars, as an anachronistic return in time. By doing so, he brought another *topos* that followed along with the one of national delay: the idea of exile. In the pages of his book, exile gained a renewed force, and three decades later, it took a more sociological feature with the well-known phrase of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda,⁸ written in his *Raízes do Brasil / Roots of Brazil* (Holanda 1936): “we are still exiled in our own land”. For the people living the passage from monarchy and slavery to the republic and free labor, feeling out of place with their contemporaries was also a kind of temporal exile in which they felt they were out of time.

⁵ Joaquim Nabuco (1849–1910), politician, diplomat, historian and lawyer, one of the most known abolitionists in Brazil and founder of the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Literary Academy), in 1897.

⁶ Euclides da Cunha (1866–1909), engineer, journalist, member of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute) and of the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Literary Academy).

⁷ I used the translation of Elizabeth Lowe for Penguin Books.

⁸ Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902–1982), literary critic, historian, and professor at the Universidade de São Paulo (University of São Paulo).

It is possible to consider, therefore, that writing about the nation's historical process at that particular moment was also a strategy of ordering the time. To write history was a strategy to create a temporal order, one that would be capable of producing historical sense by elaborating a collective (and affective) meaning for the homeland. It was an attempt to solve the “dilemma of non-contemporaneity” pointed out some decades later by Octavio Ianni. Reiterating the complaints made by Tristão de Athayde, his ideas invite us to think about the possibilities of representing that reality defined by the “multiplicity of times of growth” that caused a chaotic, anarchic, disoriented time, in which past, present, and future seemed to be juxtaposed in an unintelligible whole. Behind all of this lies the understanding that to write national history would be equivalent to (re)orient national temporality. Thus, any disturbance in the order of time could also mean a crisis of representation, demanding different models for the writing of history. At a more theoretical level, it is possible to establish links between temporal forms (regimes of historicity) and discursive structures (models of representation), that is, between time and narrative (Hartog 2003; Koselleck 2004; Ricouer 1983).

In the following pages, I will argue that the practice of historical essays that emerged in Brazilian intellectual context, during the first decades of twentieth century, is an answer to this particular perception of temporality which sees a disoriented time that messed up the linear and progressive order that constituted the experience of time of the previous generation, the one founded on the romantic historiography of the nineteenth century. Also, my argument emphasizes the reorganization of knowledge around 1870 (which established new forms of relationship between literature, science, and social sciences) as a main condition for the emergence of essayism as a historical tradition in Brazil. The new forms of exchange among what Wolf Lepenies has called the “three cultures” (Lepenies 1988), culminated in a very particular genre of historical narrative that preceded the academic and “professional” history produced at the universities mostly from the middle of the twentieth century.

Writing about the National Past

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the sense of national history was under suspicion. The evolutionist paradigm from the nineteenth century was not a useful reference for the writing of history anymore. Its racialist tendencies (race as the main factor of national backwardness) were rejected among the first republican generation. The term “evolution”, even though still present, already left room for the emerging idea of “modernization”, which was less linked with a dogmatism founded in the natural sciences. The twin intellectual issues for that generation, namely the “cultural delay” and the “racial inferiority”, no longer worked as the only explaining cause for the situation. Consequently, to solve these problems also meant to formulate new sorts of questions.

In his work *América Latina: Males de origem / Latin America: Illness of origin* (1905), Manoel Bomfim⁹ drew attention to another important cause, “social parasitism”. The social parasitism was an old idea that draws back to the colonies of the New

⁹ Manoel Bomfim (1868–1932), physician, psychologist, historian and director of the Escola Normal do Distrito Federal (Rio de Janeiro).

World and developed through the ruling elites of independent Latin American nations (Bomfim 1905, p. 22–23). Even though Bomfim kept an evolutionist inclination in his book by articulating biological knowledge with the emerging sociological approach, he drifted away from both the mesological influences and the racial issues to explain Brazilian “inability” in becoming a “civilized society. As Flora Süssekind noted, Bomfim tried to create another temporality to understand Brazil and Latin America as a whole:

It would be a truly hybrid method that allowed Bomfim to challenge, on the one hand, the biological paradigm, dominant in Brazilian thought since the middle of the nineteenth century, and on the other hand, the unilinear, homogeneous concept of time which grounded the nineteenth century writing of history. On the one hand, historicizing the natural domain; on the other, projecting a parasitic time on historical temporality (Süssekind 2002, p. 616).

Brazilian’s historical process was similar to the natural process in which an organism parasitizes in one’s body. An organicist theory of history offered the grounds to understand historical time. However, by refusing the precedence of environmental causes and refuting the theories of racial inferiority, Bomfim provided a mainly socio-historical approach, a properly cultural causality that overlapped the effects of geography and race. The backwardness was due to social process, not due to its innate characters (“humanity” or “geography”).

Fifteen years later, Oliveira Vianna¹⁰ joined the debate. His book *Populações meridionais do Brasil / Meridional populations of Brazil* (1920) focused on the “social characterization of our people”. “In these studies”, wrote Vianna, “I sharply focus on the research of the social and political factors of our collective formation” (Vianna 1920, p. III-IV). Even though a considerable part of his critical fortune has placed him as an apologist for racial doctrines, mainly Arianist, it is also necessary to emphasize the change in emphasis between his approach and some racist theories from the previous century. What is worth emphasizing that in both Bomfim and Vianna’s works is less their participation in the racial debate than the fact that their essays resulted from considerable efforts to reinterpret the national historical process, in order to give it another kind of intelligibility and different forms of representation of the past. Like Euclides da Cunha, Paulo Prado, Caio Prado Jr.,¹¹ Gilberto Freyre¹² and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda are both exponents of the so-called Brazilian essayistic tradition, frequently considered as precursor of modern social sciences in Brazil.

It is possible, therefore, to establish a link between Athayde’s diagnosis of a disoriented time and the tradition of historical essays of the early twentieth century. More than a description of the deeds and of the men who “built the nation” or, in a

¹⁰ Francisco José de Oliveira Vianna (1883–1951), jurist, historian, member of the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Literary Academy) and of the Tribunal de Contas de São Paulo (São Paulo’s State Audit Court).

¹¹ Caio Prado Jr. (1907–1990), historian, editor, professor at the Universidade de São Paulo (University of São Paulo), and State Deputy by São Paulo.

¹² Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987), historian, sociologist, journalist and member of the Academia Pernambucana de Letras (Academy of Pernambuco).

broader sense, the narrative of the construction of the State, it required explanations that allowed a deeper understanding of reality. For this, the key issue was to create a sociological (rather than a biological) approach to the past and to the historical process. The writing of history was a useful tool to deal with the Brazilian “national issue”, the delay regarding the socio-historical development. Organizing the nation and ordering its time were the two sides of the same coin.

From Literature to History

Nonetheless, anyone who tried to write history at that period for explaining Brazilian society should effectively deal with the precedent literary tradition. Literature used to be, as Antonio Candido suggested in 1950, the “central phenomenon” of intellectual life in nineteenth century Brazil. Historical essays, then, were only possible through a reorganization of discursive and disciplinary boundaries. Especially after the rise of sociological knowledge, facing the primacy of literature as *the* fundamental form of representation of society. In other words, literature and literary history should embody social sciences theories, an effort that a critic and historian like Silvio Romero tried to do since 1880, thinking about literature from a sociological and even an ethnographical perspective. As Rodrigo Turin points out, “criticism, literature and history, therefore, remained symptomatically close, sharing the task of delimiting the values of nationality” (Turin 2005, p. 48–49). It is important, thus, to emphasize that the essay as a genre of historical writing refers to a convergence between different kinds of knowledge. José Veríssimo,¹³ for instance, claimed that literary criticism was matched by the efforts of history, sociology, moral philosophy, physiology, psychology, the sciences of experimentation and observation, and religious or classical exegesis (Veríssimo 2001, p. 72).

According to Roberto Ventura, the “unity of knowledge” pursued by authors since 1870 demanded a kind of scientific language that would make possible “an eclectic concatenation of disparate theories and knowledges, presented as ‘universal’ wisdom” (Ventura 1991, p. 41).¹⁴ Hence historical essay emerges as a genre when institutional and disciplinary boundaries were not so obvious. For Maria da Glória de Oliveira, the period since the 1870s was “a moment of incipient disciplinary delimitations in which [the task] of critics, far from being a specialization, represented a theoretical openness to issues instituted as ‘national’” (Oliveira 2006, p. 17–18). Regarding historiography, Hugo Hruby states that, “not as academically delimited as in Europe, historical knowledge was, in Brazil, mixed with other fields at a time of great intellectual effervescence” (Hruby 2007, p. 23).

So, historical essayists took on a project that, while bringing similarities concerning the objectives of literary discourse, was somewhat different in practice. Literature, although still considerably central, was no longer the privileged “source” of investigation and the guiding principle for the representation of nationality; above all, it ceased

¹³ José Veríssimo (1857–1916), journalist, literary critic and historian of Brazilian literature, and founder of the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Literary Academy), in 1897.

¹⁴ According to another more reductionist perspective, the essayism of the 1920s and 30s emerged as an ideological product of well-defined social determinations, as a way of covering up the “real” conditions of domination in Brazilian history: “eruditism and good writing constitute the covering of the social essayism characteristic of the sons of the regional oligarchies” (Mota 1977, p. 59).

to be the main expression of what defined, for much of the nineteenth century, the nation, that is, the idea of *people*. In other words, in the search for an intellectual understanding of Brazilian society and the elaboration of a social interpretation of its formation process, the historical essay, to some extent, drifts away from literature. Even though the literary form remains, the literary documentation loses its central role in the essay writing.

Historiography and Historical Essays

If the essay writing manages to keep some autonomy regarding the literary sphere, it does not oppose to historiography, at least the hegemonic one that could be seen in two canonical authors, namely Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen¹⁵ and Capistrano de Abreu,¹⁶ as well as in some debates that occurred at the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (the Brazilian Institute of Geography and History, IHGB)¹⁷ during the turn of the century. In the case of the Institute, since its foundation, the matter of the correct periodization of Brazilian history had been on the agenda. In its inaugural session in 1839, Canon Januário da Cunha Barboza¹⁸ already had concerns to “determine the true times in the history of Brazil, and whether this should be divided into ancient and modern, or how much should be its divisions” (Barboza 1839, p. 45). The task of periodization was a fundamental step, therefore, for the proper interpretation of historical facts, even if the writing of history, placed as a work for posterity, was not limited to this.

However, the IHGB had not defined the task of producing a comprehensive synthesis of the Brazilian history as its first aim. Even in the beginning of the twentieth century, the members of the Institute thought that it was not possible yet to produce a coherent interpretation that would reveal the deep sense of the Brazilian historical process. At that period, the Institute still attributed itself to the same tasks defined since its foundation, which means a mainly documentary position of collection, identification and criticism of sources. The effective writing of a synthetic history would be bequeathed to the historians of the future, leaving for those members the charge “to prepare the ‘safe and enlightened elements for a future judgment’”. In other words, “even if the writing of the History of Brazil was delegated to the forthcoming historians, the members would continue with the arduous task of gathering documents and recording events” (Hruby 2007, p. 108). Oliveira Lima’s¹⁹ words, in the session of April 22, 1913, make this perspective clear. Echoing the words of Capistrano de Abreu, for whom Brazil did not need history, but documents, Oliveira Lima stated that in the IHGB’s journal documents should have a better place than the “essays”, for “we need

¹⁵ Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen (1816–1878), diplomat, historian, and member of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute).

¹⁶ João Capistrano de Abreu (1853–1927), historian and ethnographer, and member of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute).

¹⁷ The Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute), IHGB, was founded in 1838 and its journal began to be published in 1839.

¹⁸ Januário da Cunha Barboza (1780–1846), canon, politician, historian, and one of the founders of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro (Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute).

¹⁹ Manuel Oliveira Lima (1867–1928), diplomat, literary critic, historian and one of the founders of the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Literary Academy), in 1897.

first to prepare the material, gathering as much as possible what is dispersed” (Lima 1913, p. 486). The writing of history and the writing of historical essays should wait.

For Varnhagen and Capistrano, the issue took on other proportions. The displacements that occurred in historiography from Varnhagen’s practice to Capistrano’s were considerable, with a deepening in the method of documentary criticism, as well as in the collection of sources for the writing of national history (remembering the work of notation done by Capistrano to the third edition of Varnhagen’s *História Geral do Brasil / General History of Brazil*). But equally notable, according to Capistrano, is the lack of aptitude of Varnhagen to produce an interpretive work that went beyond the facts and the deeds, resulting in a work of more synthetic features. Similar criticism were made to the work of Capistrano, who was accused of failing to make a more comprehensive effort to generalize the arguments and synthesize his history. In other words, the failure on the part of the two historians (more in one and less in the other) to move from empirical descriptions to a properly sociological interpretation.

Despite the intentions sketched by Varnhagen regarding the objective of his masterpiece, in which he tried not to “lose sight of the indispensable condition of unity” in Brazilian history, it seems that the author recognized, in a kind of rhetoric of modesty, his inability for the task. After all, as he wrote himself, the building of history demanded a more capable architect (De Varnhagen 1854, p. 11). Both Capistrano and Oliveira Lima, lamented the fact that Varnhagen was not able to go beyond the facts, suggesting that he.

could excavate documents, demonstrate their authenticity, solving puzzles, unraveling mysteries, leaving nothing to do to your successors in the realm of facts; however, in understanding such facts in their origins, in their connection with broader facts and the roots from which they flow; to generalize their actions and formulate their theory; in representing them as consequences and in demonstrating of two or three basic laws, he did not succeed, nor would he succeed (De Abreu 1931, p. 139).

According to Capistrano, Varnhagen lacked “plastic and sympathetic spirit”, since his history “did not appear to be a supportive and coherent whole”. Besides that, he missed the fundamental step that would make the work a *philosophical history* along the lines designed and suggested earlier by German botanist Karl F. P. von Martius²⁰ and that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, would be increasingly less philosophical than sociological. Capistrano goes so far as to more specifically point out the deficiencies of our “first historian”, when he says it is.

a pity that he ignored or disdained the body of creative doctrines that in recent years have become a science under the name of sociology. Without that beam, he could not see the way in which social life is worked out. Without it, the

²⁰ Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius (1794–1868), German physician, botanist, and explorer. Martius travelled to Brazil in 1817, returned to Germany in 1820, and wrote an awarded essay on How to write Brazilian History, published in the IHGB’s journal in 1843.

relationships that link the successive moments of the life of a people could not be designed in their spirit in order to clarify the different features and factors reciprocally (De Varnhagen 1854, p. 11).

If, on the one hand, Capistrano criticized Varnhagen for his failures, on the other hand there are many authors who regretted the fact that Capistrano has never fully written the sociological history of Brazil that he expected Varnhagen should have done. Without disqualifying Capistrano's progress, one of them said that his works "define a critical moment in our historiography, a modernist revolution that has not been completed" (Rodrigues 1966, p. 90). Nevertheless, he would take a step ahead of Varnhagen, towards a "philosophical history" of Brazil, because "it is not only in the socio-economic foundations or in the natural and anthropological sub foundations that he seeks the historical category of a period. It is also [...] in the aims, in the rules of life, in the feelings and ideals of each circle that it seeks the frontiers of its times" (Rodrigues 1966, p. 136). But it seems that the step was not taken until the end.

Perhaps he lacked a more refined taste for literary work that would allow him to write the great story that he was able to write and that he was expected to do. In 1907, José Veríssimo wrote about Capistrano's book *Capitulos de história colonial / Chapters of colonial history* (1907) that unfortunately, it was "not yet the complete and definitive work (as a story can be), that only perhaps his long, constant, and well-used studies [...] could give us" (Veríssimo in Vianna 2001, p. LXXII). Silvio Romero was somewhat even crueler:

for more than thirty years, we let ourselves be deceived, and we even looked forward to the History of Brazil, promised by Capistrano. We knew that he is very knowledgeable about our historical facts [...] But, after ten years of waiting, we recognize that his knowledge is purely a *micrological* one, minutiae, without relief of any kind (Romero 1954, p. 1979–1980, n. 1).

And, almost repeating Capistrano's words about Varnhagen, Romero said that Capistrano's writing lacks "imagination, synthetic ability, the talent to narrate, the philosophy of facts, the general scope, the analytical perspicacity", concluding that, "in short, he lacks all the skills of great historians" (Romero 1954, p. 1979–1980, n. 1).

Veríssimo and Romero were not alone in their criticism. Henri Hauser, a Franco-Algerian professor invited to join the teaching staff of the University of the Federal District, in 1937 stated regarding Capistrano, "his name was not linked to a great work" and he was only seen "as an essayist", which meant, in this case, that he had a fragmentary work (Hauser in Vianna 2001, p. LXXV). More recently, Maria da Glória de Oliveira showed how, even if Capistrano was a tireless reader, he was always postponing the writing of Brazilian history that he had planned. In her detailed study, she suggests that because he was not concerned with writing a more comprehensive work, he ended by writing fragments. In her words, "it would correspond, in short, to the establishment of a writing regime whose validation devices would not be found, exclusively, in the explanation of the critical apparatus used by the historian, but in the explanatory coherence of the text he prepared" (Oliveira 2006, p. 160). And this is

evident not only in the making of his *Chapters*, but also in the set of a work composed by shorter texts which were published in newspapers.

Capistrano's specific place in the history of Brazilian historiography has only been partially reconstructed here. Although his work was "incomplete", Capistrano is deemed as a "transition", someone who could converge the interpretative intention established by the philosophical approach of the literary historiography with the documentary efforts demanded by "conventional" historians who had erudite and empiricist approaches. After noting the non-fulfillment of the sociological ideal in Varnhagen's history, Capistrano made his expectations clear:

we hope that someone, initiated in the contemporary thinking movement, [someone] who knows the new methods and the powerful instruments that science makes available to its followers, [...] writes a history of our country worthy of the century of [Auguste] Comte and Herbert Spencer. [Someone] inspired by the theory of evolution, who shows the unity that ties the three centuries we live. [Someone] guided by the law of the *consensus*, who shows us the *rationale* of our civilization, points out the organic interdependence of the phenomena, and clarifies each one by the other. [Someone who] pulls the distressing secret of the present from the bowels of the past and frees us from the crass empiricism in which we gloat (De Abreu 1931, p. 140–141).

To a certain extent, the so-called "interpreters of Brazil", also known as the "essayists of Brazilian history", would be those who crossed the intricacies of the "new" scientific theories, offering answers to the "distressing secret" of their present times. Historical writing won philosophical or sociological aspects, despite the concerns with the criteria of classical criticism of sources.

Essayism and the Synthesis of Brazilian History

By searching for the deep meaning that defined Brazilian history, historical essays moved the eyes from the visible surface to the underlying scopes of the historical process. In this sense, the attention paid to the document, essential for the critical task of both Varnhagen and Capistrano, ends up occupying a secondary position. As Oliveira Vianna argued, "in the current state of historical science, the text of the documents is not sufficient in itself to revive an era, or to understand the particular evolution of a given human aggregate" (Vianna 1920, p. I-II). Manoel Bomfim argued for a similar idea a few years earlier when he said that, in the study of national history, we had "to highlight their general features [and] thought will neither be lost in the deviations of erudition [meaning documentary criticism], nor will it expend energy for only literary effects" (Bomfim 1929, p 8). The main objective of the essayistic tradition was the synthesis of the movement, not the description of its facts.

Therefore, between a "general theory" (known in nineteenth century as a "philosophical history") and the documentary criticism unfolds the place of the historical essay. Caio Prado Jr. outlined the idea by saying that his essay *Evolução política do Brasil / Political evolution of Brazil* (1933) was less a "history of Brazil", rather a

“simple essay”. It was a “synthesis of Brazilian political evolution”, not “its complete history”. The purpose of this essay was to find the main lines of the historical process, not to describe the factual history of politics (Prado Jr. 1999, p. 7). It is evident that Caio Prado was not concerned with an intense empirical investigation, rather he intended to furnish a new interpretation based on the manifold of histories from different theoretical approaches written up to that moment, according to a different theoretical bias.

The distinction between the “external feature of events” and the “intimacy of history” created two distinct and separate levels, “the research of facts”, on the one hand, and, on the other, “the interpretation of process”. This was the main characteristic of historical essayism. For Paulo Prado essays deal with “deductive speculation”, not with the establishment of events. It implied, in turn, “to consider history, not as a romantic resurrection, nor as a German conjectural science; but as a set of mere impressions, searching in the mysterious background of conscious or instinctive forces, the influences that dominated, in the course of time, both individuals and collectivity” (Prado 1931, p. 187).

In the Brazilian historiography, the historical essay of the early twentieth century emerges at the threshold between the synthetic intentions of literary history and the erudite claims of the conventional historiography. It is a discursive synthesis of a historical reality or, in the terms mentioned above, the re-ordering of the experience of time by the historical writing. Thus, placed between literary history and historical criticism, the entire field of social sciences opens up for the interpretative essay, precisely in the context in which Brazilian sociology, as a discipline, did not yet have defined institutional means for its autonomy. There is no coincidence that the authors often deemed as essayists, such as Euclides da Cunha, Oliveira Vianna or Gilberto Freyre, figure as “the founding fathers” of the sociological knowledge in Brazil, even though the disparity of the works indicates the imprecision of the certificate of paternity. Antonio Candido, for instance, has already described his work *Blacklands. The Canudo's campaign* (1902) as “a book placed between literature and naturalistic sociology, [which] defines an end and a beginning: the end of literary imperialism, the beginning of scientific analysis applied to the most important aspects of Brazilian society” (Candido 2000, p. 122).

The historical essay, then, is not just the text on the frontier between art and science. It is the genre that combines different disciplinary fields for the sake of writing a synthetic history. It is the point of convergence in the first decades of the twentieth century of the “three cultures” that have defined the preceding century (Lepenes 1988). The synthesis of history made by the writing of historical essays, therefore, was a powerful tool to give an answer to the problem of the disorder of time in the first decades of Brazilian republic.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Further Reading

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